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SUBJECT: UZBEK PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS: FINAL WRAP-UP

REF: 09 TASHKENT 1651

11. (SBU) SUMMARY: After the second round of parliamentary elections took place in 39 constituencies on January 10, Uzbekistan's Liberal-Democratic Party emerged with over 35% of the seats in the Lower House of Parliament, the Oliy Majlis. Relative party percentages remain almost unchanged from the previous parliament, and Dilorom Toshmuhammadova was reelected as the Speaker of the Lower House on January 22. Analysis of the candidate list indicates that Uzbeks from a broad range of occupations and backgrounds ran for office, and the newly elected members of parliament (MPs) reflect some of the diversity of Uzbek society. Parties approached the election campaign with a novel spirit of competitiveness, but only time will tell whether that spirit will live on in parliament. All in all, the elections can best be interpreted as a tightly managed political exercise, with some elements of "choice" at the margins. END SUMMARY.

SECOND ROUND VOTING

12. (U) In the first round of elections on December 27, 96 candidates received the required number of votes to claim their seats without a run-off election. A second round of voting was held on January 10 for the remaining 39 seats. In each of these 39 constituencies, voters chose between the two candidates who received the most votes on December 27. According to the GOU's statistics, there was 79.7% voter turn-out in the second round of the elections, but it is likely that these numbers were inflated by the widespread practice of proxy or "family" voting (see reftel). Almost one third of the run-offs took place in the Ferghana District. According to a contact from that region, many residents of Ferghana crossed off all of the candidates on the ballot in the first round of voting, a possible sign of disgruntlement and frustration.

DEBUNKING THE CONSPIRACY THEORIES

13. (SBU) Conspiracy theories about the elections abound, but (as is often the case with conspiracy theories) lack proof, and require giant leaps of logic. No international observers witnessed the second round of voting, and therefore the local independent media has speculated that the run-offs were engineered precisely so that any irregularities would take place away from prying international eyes. However, the available evidence suggests that the run-off elections were probably just what they seemed. By examining candidate lists, listening to the parties, and observing the voting at the polls, our conclusion is that the elections, though flawed, were not just a sham, totally orchestrated by the central government. The candidate list was restricted by the government, but the people running for office were the usual suspects for a parliamentary election-local politicians and community organizers, heads of agricultural collectives, and general pillars of the community, including doctors, lawyers, businessmen, and school directors. In fact, one of the Embassy's Democracy Commission grantees, the chairwoman of the Water Users' Association in the Ferghana Valley, is one of the newly elected MPs.

14. (SBU) Based on what we do know, the following scenario

seems to be the best explanation of how the electoral process works in Uzbekistan: First, the parties identify citizens whom they see as good parliamentary candidates. (NOTE: The parties are made up of those politically active citizens who have "bought in" to the GOU's political message-e.g. the idea that Uzbekistan needs a strong central government and "evolutionary" progress towards democracy. Opposition candidates need not apply.) Second, the parties likely submit their lists of potential candidates to the GOU security apparatus for vetting. Again, any signs of opposition or dissent would be deal-breakers. And finally, the government conducts the elections themselves as correctly as possible, secure in the knowledge that no opposition candidates are even on the ballot. Following the theory that the simplest explanation is usually the best, this scenario makes far more sense than the idea that the entire elections process is a facade masking a process that was engineered from the outset.

LIBERAL DEMOCRATIC PARTY DOMINATES

15. (U) The Liberal-Democratic Party, considered the party of entrepreneurs and businessmen and the party most closely associated with Islom Karimov, will dominate the Oliy Majlis with 53 seats (about 35% of the total). Since 10% of the seats in the Lower House were reserved for representatives from the Ecological Movement-chosen separately at an Environmental Movement convention-the Liberal-Democratic Party actually won more than 39% of contested seats. The People's Democratic Party of Uzbekistan earned 32 seats (about 21% of the total), the "Milliy Tiklanish" (National Revival) Democratic Party took 31 seats (about 20.6%), and the "Adolat" (Justice) Social Democratic Party took 19 seats

(about 12.6%). This breakdown of seats is virtually unchanged from the previous parliament-the main differences are the addition of Ecological Movement MPs, the absence of independent MPs, and the slight gain in the standings of the People's Democratic Party of Uzbekistan (PDP). (In the previous parliament, the PDP trailed Milliy Tiklanish by one seat; now they have taken second place by a margin of one seat.) Interestingly, we learned that although independent nominees were not allowed on the ballot this year, at least one party (Adolat) nominated several candidates that are not party members-so, in a sense, independent candidates could run, as long as they were nominated by an official party. On January 22, the new parliament was convened and Dilorom Tashmammedova was reelected to her post as Speaker of the Lower House. Five vice speakers-the heads of each of the four political parties and the Ecological Movement-were also chosen during the first session of parliament.

16. (SBU) A spirit of competitiveness among the parties reared its head for the first time during this parliamentary election campaign. The local U.S. representative of the National Democratic Institute commented that he thought party members had really taken his campaign pointers to heart. He suggested that candidates visit voters and leave campaign literature with the candidate's name and picture, and a clear, pithy slogan-and many candidates definitely did distribute campaign literature meeting those specifications. Each of the parties vaguely follows an international party model (e.g. the Social Democratic Party sees itself as a sister organization to Social Democratic parties in Europe), which theoretically gives them a great deal of latitude for debate. However, in practice the parties do not engage in dissent with the executive branch. Party representatives claim that they are learning to exercise influence on legislation and policy, as part of Uzbekistan's "evolutionary" transition to democracy, and they certainly have been more vocal in their inter-party disagreements. It will be interesting to see whether their newfound sense of power and competitiveness will influence their actions and interactions when parliament is convened.

MANY LAWYERS, MORE WOMEN, FEW INCUMBENTS

17. (U) The new line-up of deputies will include 37 economists and 34 lawyers (24.7% and 22.7% percent of the total number of deputies, respectively), although Central Election Commission Chairman Mirza-Ulugbek Abdusalomov emphasized that "the lower house represents nearly all segments of society." The number of female deputies in the Oliy Majlis increased from 21 (about 17.5% of the 120 member parliament) to 33 (22% of the 150 member

parliament). Only 31.3% of the elected members of parliament are incumbents, but local political experts believe that they will provide sufficient institutional knowledge to ensure a smooth transition. This seemingly low number of incumbents should not be interpreted as a popular rebuke of the previous parliament; in fact, only 53 incumbent parliamentarians were on the ballot. Of the 53 that ran for reelection, 47 won. The big question (for which we have no answer) is whether those 67 former deputies chose not to run for reelection for personal reasons, or whether their parties chose not to nominate them for political reasons.

18. (SBU) COMMENT: The elections were neither free nor fair, but perhaps they were not wholly worthless. The GOU kept opposition candidates off the ballot and controlled the media, as they always do. Ironically, though, our sense is that the election outcome would probably not change very much in a fully free and fair election. Although many ordinary Uzbek citizens are unhappy with the state of affairs in the country-especially when it affects their pocketbooks-few of them actually oppose the government at this point. Whether this reflects the placid political culture or deeper fear of repression, or both, is the subject of constant analysis. We can only hope that "democratic exercises" like these parliamentary elections will be small building blocks for real democracy in the future. END COMMENT.
NORLAND